

Increasing Participation in Internationalization Initiatives: Three Methodological Perspectives

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Study abroad (SA) and becoming involved in cross-cultural activities yield a number of benefits, including personal growth, intercultural development, and increased motivation to study (Lassegard, 2013). Unfortunately for Japan, the number of higher education (HE) students going abroad for educational purposes has been in steady decline since the mid-2000s (MEXT, 2010). The federal government has responded to this troubling trend by streamlining financial resources into the higher and mid-tier universities (McNeill, 2010). One recipient of this government funding is Kwansei Gakuin University (KGU), which has developed new internationally focused programs such as the Cross-Cultural College (CCC) and the government-led Global 30 initiative. This paper identifies two potential research questions that could be used to monitor and improve these programs at KGU, while still in their infancy. The first explores the relationship between the contemporary goals of the institution and how they align or digress from student attitudes and motivations. The second question intends to identify the barriers to enrolling in SA and how they might differ from those of regional neighbors. The author then proposes three methodological perspectives, which fall under the constructivist approach, that seem appropriate for sufficiently answering the questions. Based on past studies that relate to SA and internationalization, the author recommends a mixed-method approach as optimal for acquiring greater insight into the decline of SA in Japan and how KGU might counter the effect through gaining a better understanding of its students.

PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Study abroad (SA) and learning opportunities where higher education (HE) students visit other countries are increasing exponentially in the global context (OECD, 2011). This is encouraging news for many countries' higher education institutions (HEIs) that aim to enhance global citizenship and *internationalization*. Internationalization is a term that is interpreted and applied

differently by various stakeholders in HE (Knight, 2004). Since the idea of internationalization may differ at the national/sector level, the institutional level, and across borders, this paper will adhere to a broad definition that focuses on the HE context, that is a “process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education” (Knight, 2003, p. 2). As an approach to achieving internationalization and more globally minded students, institutions in Japan have been urging the development and facilitation of SA.

Research has suggested that SA results in a myriad of benefits including personal growth, greater academic commitment and intercultural development (Lassegard, 2013). In Japan, the number of HE students going abroad to study has been in steady decline since the mid-2000s (MEXT, 2010). Even compared to neighboring countries with a significantly lower population, like Taiwan and South Korea, Japan is now sending fewer students abroad. Japan has responded to this troubling trend by injecting money, in the form of the current Global 30 grants program (2012), into the universities via the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). At KGU, one such program that has been developed using these grants includes the Cross-Cultural College’s (CCC) World Citizen Education Program. This program is comprised of the Global Leader Certificate, Global Expert Certificate and Global Citizen Certificate programs. The Global Leader Certificate program is aimed at fostering leadership in the global community; the Global Expert Certificate program seeks to develop specialized skills with high language and communication proficiency; and the Global Citizen Certificate program endeavors to cultivate global competency in multicultural environments. The CCC is a Canada-Japan collaborative program for educating world citizens as future leaders. The overall goal of this initiative is to increase the exposure of foreign culture to KGU students, while giving more opportunity to students who want to study abroad.

Despite accompanying mission statements that include global citizenship and cross-cultural awareness (Global 30, 2012), generating an increased amount of interest in SA has proved challenging, especially when factoring in the current demographic shifts involved with the decreasing birth rate and ageing population of Japan (CIA Factbook, 2013). In projecting these national trends as potential pitfalls to the success of international programs at KGU, the author has shaped two potential research questions. Each question addresses a perceived gap in the knowledge that currently exists concerning the SA problems in Japan:

- 1) What are the primary educational and personal goals of students who enroll in the CCC program and are they congruent with the institutional and/or governmental goals?

- 2) Are the barriers to enrolment in international programs similar to those in neighboring countries (Taiwan and South Korea)? Does the Japanese educational context pose unique challenges?

While still considering itself as an institution rooted in Christian values, the modern principles of KGU have become more secular with focus on 1) global education, 2) practical education and 3) interdisciplinary education. These contemporary goals seem aligned with the current mission statement:

The content of a KG education nurtures people to develop social, moral, and academic skills that allow them to participate creatively around the world, and take leadership as agents of change in the societies where they live, thus actualizing the ideal of “world citizen” (Kwansei Gakuin University, 2013, para.3).

In realizing this goal and enabling students to become players on the world stage, it is important for the internationalization initiatives to be successful. KGU can improve its position in accomplishing this by gaining a greater understanding of its students and how they might interpret the SA experience during their university careers.

APPLYING METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

If one subscribes to the belief that contemporary HE problems of today require theories grounded in mixed-method research (Slaughter, 2001), then applying multiple methodological perspectives in answering the aforementioned questions is reasonable. Since the two presented research questions fall under the fields of HE, psycholinguistics and culture studies, a constructivist research approach in which “the learners construct knowledge for themselves – each learner individually (and socially) constructs meaning – as he or she learns” (Hein, 1991), would be suitable. In addressing the second question regarding barriers to enter international programs in Japan, some researchers have reported *language anxiety* to be a considerable deterrent (Williams & Andrade, 2008). If language anxiety exists in the cultural characteristics of Japanese learners to a greater degree than in other nationalities, then this manifestation of Sapir-Whorf’s linguistic determinism (as cited in Brown & Eisterhold, 2004) would parallel Moses and Knutsen’s (2004) constructivist view that “language is saturated with meaning and is an important part of the social scientific project” (p. 287). Regardless of which approach or approaches a researcher is inclined to embrace, one should evaluate the role that perspective might play in the development of the model. For instance, factors such as culture, bias, past education and other influences may shape perspective, and ultimately, the types of outcomes that are generated from research.

To answer the two proposed questions, the researcher decided on three methodological perspectives that predominantly fall under the constructivist

approach. For each perspective, past studies that relate to the researcher's questions will be summarized and analyzed to determine how they may or may not provide an adequate framework for the proposed study.

Case study perspective

Case studies are used to describe, explore and explain certain phenomena. They can involve either a single case or multiple cases within the same context or study scope (University of Liverpool, 2013; Tight, 2003). This approach can involve various methods and sources of information, and these can help determine whether the case study perspective is constructivist or naturalist in nature. For example, a case study that generates a lot of quantitative data could be classified as naturalist while another case study that involves content analysis of qualitative data from in-depth interviews would be more aligned with constructivist methodologies. In answering the two research questions, both types of case studies could be used to provide support.

If applying the case study perspective to the KGU context, a multiple case design would be appropriate. In Watabe's (2010) case study involving three national universities, specific criteria for subjects were established to ensure accuracy in exploring the phenomenon of internationalization within Japan's HEIs. To satisfy the aforementioned criteria of including "multiple cases within the same context or study scope" (Tight, 2003), Watabe included senior leaders, long-serving tenured professors and administrators who are involved in decision-making processes. A total of 40 participants were chosen and interviewed for 60 to 90 minutes, and Watabe was able to identify five common elements amongst the three universities that acted as a backbone to the study. Other researchers who conducted related case studies include Ford (2009) and Casanave (1998). Ford collected qualitative data from five Japanese returnees to determine themes that each participant commented on. These themes included bullying and victimization; identity issues; and modes of classroom interaction. Similar to the participant criteria established by Watabe (2010), Ford selected five females aged 18-22 with native-like fluency in English. In Casanave's case study, respondents included four bilingual Japanese scholars who graduated with at least a master's degree from an American HEI.

As described, establishing participant criteria in a multiple-case design is paramount. It is well documented in prior studies that students with exposure to life abroad have a greater tendency to enroll in international and SA programs (Lassegard, 2013; McNeill, 2010). In answering the research question related to motivational goals and unique barriers, it would be interesting to identify 'target students', or those who have limited experience abroad but who have some interest in studying overseas. Through in-depth and semi-structured interviews (Watabe, 2010; Ford, 2009; Casanave, 1998) with these subjects, it could be possible to identify the key themes and elements that account for student interest and disinterest in potentially enrolling in international study opportunities at KGU.

Phenomenological perspective

The phenomenological perspective focuses on developing an understanding of phenomena through observing, interacting and communicating with the subjects who are experiencing the phenomena (University of Liverpool, 2013; Tight, 2003). This perspective has been applied to various studies involving HE, and more specifically, internationalization.

Whitsed and Wright (2011) applied a constructionist and phenomenological perspective within an interpretive paradigm to identify how foreign adjunct professors of English conceptualize their role against the backdrop of internationalization. Similar to the case study perspective, qualifying criteria were applied to 43 participants and this was followed by one-to-one, in-depth interviews described as “systematically structured yet flexible” (p. 34). This approach differed from the case study method in its open and thematic coding technique used to establish the meta-narratives or contextual ‘phenomena’ of 1) appearance over substance, 2) impression management, 3) institutional indifference towards foreign professors and 4) uncertainty in roles within the HEI. These themes helped identify a discontinuity between policy and progress at the HEI as well as a perception of foreign teachers as being exploitable by students, Japanese administrators and academics.

Froes (2010) also applied a phenomenological perspective in examining acculturation experiences in Korea and Japan; however, in this case, only the researcher identified the phenomena. Basing conclusions on her experiences in both countries as a half-German, half-Korean student, researcher and professor, Froes reflected on personal experiences in describing the plurality and complexities involved in the social networks of both research settings. These “in-depth and conscious descriptions and reflections” (p. 333) of one person provide a stark contrast to the approach by Whitsed and Wright (2011), where over 40 participants were used to explain phenomena in HE. This dichotomy of approaches shows a degree of flexibility that may be employed when answering the questions related to the international programs at KGU.

Based on these studies, applying phenomenology within the scope of this study’s research questions seems like a legitimate solution. In answering the first question about motivational forces (i.e. goals, ambitions, etc.) in joining international programs, students who are in a position to enroll in a program like the CCC could be identified and interviewed about their decision making processes and why a semester abroad would or would not suit their future academic and professional goals. This could segue into a line of questioning regarding factors that may dissuade some students from participating in SA or other international opportunities.

Comparative perspective

Usually involving large data sets from existing sources, a comparative approach aims to compare and contrast groups, samples, or populations (University of Liverpool, 2013; Tight, 2003). As identified previously, there is a

perceived information gap involved with the reasons surrounding the declining SA numbers of Japan in comparison to neighboring countries with much smaller populations, like Taiwan and South Korea. Simple demographics may seem like an obvious explanation for the discrepancy. However, the comparative perspective would be useful in identifying other comparable measures and factors, such as scores on English proficiency tests, perceptions of life abroad, and degree of language anxiety or other deterrents to joining programs. This type of perspective has been applied to relevant research in Japan and other countries, and data could provide insight and direction when devising a specific research plan for the KGU context.

Dedoussis (2004) uses past literature and collected data to compare cross-cultural phenomena between the Arab World and Japan. In this case, there was a perceived dearth of literature contrasting the organizational culture of Arab countries with other regions around the world. Through past cultural studies (Hofstede, 1991) and personal experiences as student and instructor at four universities in the research settings, Dedoussis identifies four values that are common to the cultural profiles of the two regions in question. In another study involving the comparative perspective, Mori (2009) analyses the accreditation systems of the United States and Japan. Like Dedoussis (2004), Mori uses research from other academics as well as official accreditation documents from the government (Japan University Accreditation Association, 2010). Mori concludes by analyzing the differences in national accreditation through personal opinion and interpretation.

Recommend approach for the proposed research project

Whichever techniques are employed, it is prudent to be aware of the bias and personal perspective that can influence data interpretation and conclusions. If a research project were launched at KGU, the comparative approach complemented by both the case study- and phenomenological-perspectives would offer the best method to answer the research questions presented in this paper. However, if the case study perspective was to be used exclusively as the research tool, it would still offer significant flexibility in analyzing techniques.

If a comparative perspective is adopted for this proposed research, then there are several past cross-cultural studies that could act as frameworks and models. Daly (2011) discusses the dwindling interest in SA amongst Australian students, and Clarke, Flaherty, Wright and McMillen (2009) present data that show interest in SA amongst American students as reaching a peak. Both studies could represent the second setting of a comparative study. However, one trend that especially sticks out is the emergence of students from countries with much smaller populations surpassing Japan in terms of total numbers of students who go abroad for academic reasons. Research conducted by McNeill (2010) identifies financial constraints as the top deterrent for Japanese students to SA, so this is incongruent with the global trends of SA, especially in developing

countries that send a considerable number of students abroad, such as Vietnam and Thailand (Institute of International Education, 2013).

CONCLUSION

As part of the internationalization movement at HEIs around the globe, mission statements containing international dimensions and goals of fostering intercultural competence are omnipresent (Ayoubi & Massound, 2007). Unsurprisingly, these features are present at KGU with stated purposes including global education and the cultivation of global citizens. Despite decreasing interest in international programs such as SA, the Japanese government is injecting significant funds into the universities to promote international programs such as the CCC and World Citizen Education program. A significant amount of research exists on the internationalization attempts of HEIs in Japan; however, studies largely neglect student attitudes towards international initiatives and sojourn opportunities. To reduce this knowledge gap, the proposed questions in this paper, and approaches to answering them, could offer some insight into why Japanese students are joining such programs at lower rates than regional neighbors.

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